

Back in June, Phil and I provided music for a service of remembrance at the Benedictine Care Center. He brought his guitar, I brought my mountain dulcimer, and we did some instrumental and vocal hymns for those gathered. The people there were so incredibly appreciative and affirming of our music, but I can't tell you how many pointed to my dulcimer afterward and asked me, "what is it you're playing"? They'd never seen one before! I forget how unusual mountain dulcimers are, given that we now have a mountain dulcimer ensemble, Sweet Chaos, that can number up to 9 of us; we just played last Sunday, if you recall. But, maybe just 10 years ago I had never heard of, nor heard play, nor seen in person, a mountain dulcimer either. Then Jim Allert played In the Bleak Midwinter on his mountain dulcimer at an evening Advent service, and I was entranced. "What is it?", I wondered in amazement. That wonder finally found its way into action a year and a half ago, when I received a dulcimer for Christmas. We were still finding our way back from the pandemic with some anxiety, I had broken my wrist badly the preceding summer, and the notion that I should try out this instrument just came to me one day.....and the rest is history. I play my instrument frequently, and it is somehow uniquely musical food for my soul. It reawakened my love for old hymns and spirituals, whose words brought a sense of peace. It also provided accidental occupational therapy for my wrist break and surgery, though that wasn't part of my intention. So, I originally didn't even know what it was, and I didn't know how much it would matter to me, but now that dulcimer seems like a gift from God that nurtures my spirit. It's like *manna from heaven*.

In response to this intriguing Bible text from Exodus before us, let's try traveling back in *time* about 3,200 years and traveling halfway around the world *geographically* into the Sinai desert, where we meet up with the escaping Hebrew slaves we just read about-- because they are about to have a *manna from heaven* moment. A much more literal manna moment than mine. In fact, this story *begins* the whole metaphor of manna from heaven. It's been about a month since this entire enslaved people were led by Moses out of slavery in Egypt to head towards a promised land hundreds of wilderness miles away. We call this escape the Exodus, and it was God's response to the misery of God's enslaved people, God's liberating act on their behalf that changed

everything for them. The slaves left in a hurry, packing only the most meager of possessions and food, and now, a month later, the reality of surviving in a desert wilderness is setting in. We talk about food deserts as regions in urban areas where people have limited access to healthy and affordable food; but the Hebrew people were *literally* in a food desert. It's not easy to supply enough food for an entire population of impoverished runaway slaves in a wilderness desert. This present anxiety does something most interesting to their collective memory; suddenly, looking back, slavery doesn't seem so bad after all. At least they had pots with which to cook and some food rations to put within them. However brutal their treatment and miserable their lives, at least they had the security of knowing they would be fed, so that they could provide slave labor. And that present anxiety of scarcity produces a predictably human response: they blame and complain. They blame Moses and Aaron, their leaders, they blame God, Who liberated them, and they complain vocally about it all. This is a rich story because it's just *so like us*; so very human and typical.

Consider the capriciousness of memory at play here, which is so true to us. How easily we look back with nostalgia, how frequently we romanticize, or even completely re-write the past. Compared to the challenges of the present, the past almost always seems simpler, gentler, and altogether nicer than it likely actually was. This is true in relation to how it *actually* was for *us*, many of us whom have lived relatively comfortable lives. How much *more* is it true that for a large portion of humanity that *didn't* live so comfortably, the past was *far* from simple, gentle, or nice? Even within our own nation? Realistically, not all that long ago in our country, you didn't want to be physically handicapped, or dealing with mental illness, or an immigrant, or a person of color, or possibly even a woman, depending on the circumstances in which you found yourself. Certainly you didn't want to be divorced or have gender identity or sexual orientation concerns. Some might argue you still don't want to find yourself in any of those categories, but when we look back with nostalgia, we can forget how much progress *actually has happened* over the last decades in regard to race, gender, sexual orientation, physical handicaps, our understanding of mental illness, and so on. We all tend to put on rose-colored glasses looking back, so it's a natural thing to do, but it's also a *dangerous* thing to do. *We can't learn* from a history that we don't represent honestly in our memories. Certainly that's what is happening here with

the escaping Hebrew slaves in our text. Rather than dealing constructively with the food issues of their present, they look are looking *back* on their agonizing enslavement as a simpler, better time when they got more to eat. The grass is always greener, isn't it? Either in the past or in someone else's yard in the present? So very human. We might think this would cause God to despair or grow angry, but God remains gracious and compassionate. Understanding their need, the Lord will provide bread that rains from heaven upon them, as well as quail to provide meat. Last Sunday, when Jesus fed 5000 people from 5 loaves and 2 fishes, we saw a miracle of provision from God for those involved. This Sunday, we see the same thing, a miracle of provision. God is providing manna in the wilderness.

The word "Manna" has come to be associated with God's nurture of us, whether physically, as in this instance of our text, or spiritually, as in my reference to my dulcimer. But the Hebrew people's reaction to the bread from heaven was the same as my reaction to my first encounter with a dulcimer: "*what is it*"? In fact, the Hebrew word, "manna", literally means, "what is it?" That's what they called their new food. Because although they had complained about scarcity and longed for bread, when God responded with bread from heaven, they didn't know what it was and they didn't recognize that this was how God was going to provide for them. The quail show up in the evenings, the flaky breadly substance falls like dew in the morning, and there is manna from heaven. As the psalm this morning put it, "mortals ate the food of angels". How wondrous, how amazing, is that?

But here are two drawbacks to manna that rub against us...*we* don't make it fall from heaven, and we *can't* store it up. Manna from heaven is just that...manna from *heaven*. It's God's provision for us, of some kind, that God generously delivers to us, but not on our terms or command or schedule. We can't *make* God provide manna from heaven, and we can't manipulate God in how or when we receive such manna, and that's not how we like to operate. As people used to ordering through Amazon, we expect quick and specific service, so this is a problem for us. *Furthermore*, we can't store up manna, even more of a problem. In fact, even as God is providing this manna, God indicates that there is a kind of test involved. We read that God said, "Each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will

follow my instruction or not.” So what’s that about? Well, it seems that the people were to gather up just what they needed for that day, and *nothing more*---which would accomplish what? One lectio group member suggested it related to safe food handling; in a culture with no easy means of preserving food, it’s much safer to take just what one can eat within one day. True statement! Another factor is making sure that there is enough for everyone---if each one takes just what *they* need for *that day*, then everyone should be able to get their share, rather than some taking the share of others. And finally, it becomes a test of trust in God: will the people trust that they don’t *need* to hoard up manna for future use, because God will provide each day’s manna, as God has promised? This is some test! We might want to recognize two things about this test. First, it’s not so much a test that people will pass or fail before *God*; God already knows how people are. There’s no implied threat here that failing the test will mean their manna ration will be cut off. It’s more the kind of test that teaches people something about *themselves*—namely how much we all want to collect and keep as much manna as we can. Secondly, all of us fail this test all the time. It’s not even worth shaming ourselves or the ancient Hebrews, because we simply will not pass this test, nor did they. Our culture, in particular, is *obsessed* with future security and avoiding scarcity of any kind. Simply having enough for each day at a time is pretty much not even on our radar. We are all about having enough for the future, about our retirement plans, long term insurance, maintaining future medical resources, having a good supply on of any kind of necessity, of financially assuring our future prosperity by getting as much as we can today and then letting it grow with compound interest. That’s so intrinsic for us, that it’s like the air we breathe, particularly for people of the class and circumstances most of us fall into. We do not trust God to supply each day’s needs without our often-strenuous efforts to do so for ourselves. Which is not even necessarily a bad thing, within our cultural context; it’s not as though we can turn back time and live like ancient peoples. We have to figure out how to live faithfully within our *present* context and culture. But even ancient peoples, who lived a far more subsistence lifestyle, failed this test. Not too long after this, the Hebrew people will be making a golden calf to worship in place of God. Like I said, this is some test! It’s not that God is looking to judge or punish us in regards to this test; it’s a matter of self-understanding. Who *are* we? We are people who do not easily trust God’s provision

for today or for the future, even in regards to manna from heaven. But having that self-understanding may provide us some insight about ourselves.

Because let's consider the irony of this. We arguably live with the least actual scarcity of any culture at any time in world history. And yet, most of us have a significant fear of scarcity, in spite of the relative prosperity we enjoy. When JD Rockefeller, the American businessman and magnate of the 19th C, was asked how much is enough, he replied, "just a little bit more than you've got." However much we have, we think we need just that little bit more! And of course, it is in the interests of a growing capitalist market economy and of those with political aspirations to propagate that perception of need. Through a barrage of media our confidence in having enough is continually undermined; instead we are taught to fear that we need more, that there's not enough to go around, that we might run out. So, we can live in the richest society in the world and *still* be consumed with anxiety about scarcity. That's one of the ways we can recognize the brokenness of humanity. It's also an insight gained from recognizing our struggle to trust God. It's *not* God's intention for us, to be driven and frantic about having all of what we might need, someday. God's intention for us in shalom: peace, contentment, trust in God's provision. Even if we can never *completely* achieve that, we *can* grow in trust and our inner turmoil can be lessened, as we practice our faith. And we do *practice* our faith---we never get it completely right, but we keep practicing.

Maybe we might contemporize this text by asking ourselves---when have I received manna from heaven? Whether literal sustenance or spiritual nurture, when has God perhaps surprised you with manna from heaven? Think carefully, because this story reminds us that we don't always *recognize* God's provision when it comes to us. "What is it"? we might ask, like the ancient Hebrews. It may take a while before we perceive how God is providing for us, giving us just what we need, clueless though we can be. How and when has God provided manna from heaven, perhaps in a time of wilderness or of wandering, for you? And as we realize how God has done so in the past, maybe we can grow in our capacity to trust that God will do so for the present and the future? *That* would be *practicing* our faith..

This morning, as we receive Holy Communion, we receive manna from heaven, don't we? We are mortals, eating the food of angels. We are those who receive the Bread of Life from the Lord Who is the Bread of Life. Why does Jesus refer to Himself this way? We understand that food staples around the world include grains, seeds, nuts, and root vegetables. Within that first category of grains, both bread and rice would fall. For much of the history of the world, most of the peoples *of* the world have been dependent upon such staples. Jesus is declaring that He is what we need---the bread of life, the staple that sustains. And the imagery of bread, as opposed to say, rice, ties in both with stories like that of the manna in the wilderness, as well as the miraculous feeding of the 5000, as well as the Last Supper, where Christ declares that the bread and wine are His body and blood. Christ is the Bread of Life. We may find ourselves wandering or in the wilderness, broken and struggling to trust, but God graciously and freely provides for us manna from heaven, the Bread of Life, as Christ hosts us in this meal of forgiveness and welcome. Amen.